What Really Happened to Rosie the Riveter?

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INTRODUCTION

The generation of women war workers, symbolized by Rosie the Riveter, has not been seriously analyzed by historians. Perhaps it is because the women disappeared as a recognizable group after the war in pursuit, according to popular mythology, of the "best years of their lives" (the title of a popular postwar film) that the war had postponed; or, as Betty Friedan suggested fifteen years later in her book, The Feminine Mystique, they were hoodwinked by returning magazine editors selling a new product "suburbia."

In either case, the conventional view of Rosie’s co-workers is that they were temporary workers: they had entered the work force for patriotic reasons only, donning unfamiliar working-class aprons and riveter masks; and they departed from factory work altogether as soon after the war as they could manage.

Although there was at least one "Back to Mamma" club founded in the late years of the war with the express purpose of persuading women to quit, most experts among them Frances Perkins, Roosevelt's female Secretary of Labor-predicted that American women would go on preferring domesticity to factory work. Others-and among these were union leaders, anxious to avoid competition between war workers and returning veterans hoped that women would retire voluntarily. But what the contemporaries failed to notice and what history has not yet set right is the degree to which the women were forcibly laid off their jobs in the postwar period.

In our view, the conventional story of Rosie’s wartime career not only ends incorrectly, but it is an inaccurate description of who was working and why. Aggregate statistics, for instance, indicate that of the 19.5 million women employed at the wartime peak (excluding women engaged in Red Cross work and the armed services), 15.9 million had been employed before the war, though not necessarily in factory work. The women who were working in the week prior to Pearl Harbor represented 25.3 percent of the female population over the age of 14, and though the increase to 19.5 million, or 36.1 percent of the female population, was substantial, it was but an increase in an already significant proportion of women working.

What was different about the woman working during the war was her age, her marital status, her participation in manufacturing, as against service and domestic work, and, above all, her rate of pay. For the second time in the twentieth century, due to the absence of men and the insatiable
appetite of a war· machine, women were needed badly enough to be offered highly paid jobs in manufacturing.

In fact, one of the differences between the situation caused by the first World War and the second, was the presence in the 1940s of industrial unions which would, as we shall see, make the laying off of temporary workers a more complicated matter.

Still, the unions notwithstanding, three million fewer women were employed in 1946 than at the peak of the war. The critical questions are whether women were laid off against their will or merely accommodated in their wish to go home; and, if they were laid off, where they landed in the economy. Our guess is that Rosie did not run to the suburbs so much as fall into a lower-paying, more traditional female job after the war. Since we know that by 1950 the percentage of employed women was almost back to the wartime peak, our suspicion is that Rosie stopped riveting, but she did not stop working. Further research will be needed to substantiate this view.

Mythology dies hard. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on Friedan's allegation that the feminine mystique was revived to keep women from maintaining the economic gains they had won during the war, the issues of equal pay, desegregation of job categories, and government-supported child care, which were much discussed during the war, did not surface again until the 1960s. The quiescence of women in the fifties may well be the result not of Rosie’s choice but of Rosie’s frustration, which is another good reason for laying the myths surrounding Rosie the Riveter to rest.

**SOURCES AND SCOPE**

A full and comprehensive survey of women war workers will have to await disaggregated data and in-depth interviews of women who were working during the war. What we have attempted to do in this preliminary survey is to determine with some degree of accuracy answers to the following kinds of questions: What type of woman actually joined the labor force during the war? What was the impact on the female labor force of the opportunities opened up by war work?

What was the real motivation of the women who worked and what were their postwar plans? In addition, we examined some of the issues that aroused women workers most. We looked at how equity was achieved, particularly in industries that had long segregated women and Negroes into separate job classifications and onto separate seniority lists; at how the federal surveillance of industry, made necessary by the war, tended to improve conditions and to set precedents that even the end of hostilities could not alter; and, finally, at the extent to which the marginal innovations which permitted some women to work, such as child-care arrangements, were meaningful.
We hypothesized that possibly there were two Rosie’s: one, a working-class girl who had been a waitress or laundress before the war and who expected to work for her living most of her life. This Rosie would have gravitated toward better-paying work in 1942 to the point of moving into one of the areas most affected by wartime contracts, even to an isolated, especially built bomber plant like Willow Run in the Detroit area. This Rosie, to carry the supposition further, had to join the union and may even have become an active member.

After being "bumped" in 1945, she would have complained when her perceived seniority was overlooked in rehiring, resented the privileges afforded veterans, and, since she had to work to live, she would have moved grudgingly downward to a lower-paying, clerical or service job. The other Rosie would be the woman who initially fitted the stereotype; she was at home or still in school, when the war began. Having joined the labor force because of the war without previous intention to work, she then decided to stay employed. When the surveys taken at the end of the war showed that as many as 85 percent of the women working wanted to stay on the job after the war, that figure must include this Rosie, the erstwhile homemaker.

The myths about Rosie were probably linked to middle-class notions that women who work do so for pin money, that few married women need to work, and that factory work is not the kind of work that women will enjoy doing, in any case. The fact, however, that by 1940, 15 million American women (not of the middle class) out of a total female population of 50.1 million were working full time, despite discrimination, lower rates of pay, and segregated job classifications, indicates that these are indeed myths.

In the absence of many secondary sources on the subject, it seemed appropriate to focus on one industry in one of the ten most affected areas. The selection of Detroit and the auto and aircraft industries had many bases: Detroit had been known before the war as a "man-employing, one-industry city"; of the ten industrial areas studied by the Women's Bureau in 1944, Detroit was the largest, having a population of 1,917,724 of whom 917,447 were employed during the war; the increase of women workers in the Detroit area between 1940 and 1945 was reported to be 112 percent.
Further, the United Auto Workers, a CIO union, had between 300,000 and 350,000 women members by the end of the war and, in response to their interests and needs, developed a number of services for women workers, including the formation of the UAW Women’s Bureau in 1944 and a regularly appearing column in the union newspaper, *Ammunition*, entitled “Sister Sue.” The Women’s Bureau (later renamed the Women’s Department), together with the union’s education and research departments, issued an array of special reports and pamphlets, most of which convey the impression that the union favored equal pay and equal rights for women.

On paper then, the UAW was advanced. Private and at this point confidential sources suggest that this was only a paper commitment for many of the men in charge, but so far, we have been unable to follow up Resolutions to see whether they were forcibly administered.

Of the most dramatic examples of a massive, war-related expansion was the construction almost overnight of the $100 million Ford Motor Company Willow Run Plant outside Detroit. The plant, designed to assemble B-24 Liberator bombers, is worth describing in some detail to give a sense of the dimension of war work and of the problem of reconversion. Built on a hitherto inaccessible site out of town, it had a capacity for 40,000 workers, although we have not found evidence as yet that more than 32,000 were employed at one time. The federal government built both the facility itself and public housing and community services for the workers. Figures reported in the press indicated that the factory cost $100 million, the public housing $25 million, and an approach highway $25 million more.

Even before the end of hostilities, Willow Run began to lay off workers. At the close of business, May 18, 1945, a union official noted a total of 9,814 workers had been laid off from Willow Run. The UAW analyzed the layoff statistics and found that 52.6 percent of the persons laid off were women; that 44.7 percent of these women had not been employed before the war (but 55.3 percent had been); and that 58 percent of the women wished to continue working (66 percent of those under 30), and especially to continue in factory work.

More significant for our understanding of the woman worker is that the average wage earned by all workers at the point of layoff in 1945 was $1.23 per hour, a good earning even for war work in 1945, and that the Ford Motor Car Company, owners of Willow Run, had never before employed women except in its administrative staff (clerical). Perhaps, in view of this background, it is not altogether surprising that 41 percent of the male workers laid off were
offered a referral, at an average wage decrease of 8.5 cents an hour, but that less than 3 percent of the women were offered other jobs and that these jobs were at wage decreases averaging better than 48 percent.

It should be further noted that when the Willow Run plant was reconverted to suit the peacetime economy, women were not rehired.

The material that follows suggests that Willow Run is reasonably typical: in the period of reconversion, beginning in the summer of 1944, women were the first to be laid off; job referrals were not as available to them; the rehiring that took place as early as 1946 in some reconverted industries ignored the "seniority" of women; and even unemployment compensation was denied if the women appeared too "choosy" about maintaining their wage rates in the new job.

LABOR MARKET DEVELOPMENTS DURING AND AFTER THE WAR

In the spring of 1940, there were 46 million persons in civilian jobs, 0 of whom 34 million were male and 12 million female, and 500,000 in the armed forces. Five years later, civilian employment had risen to 53.5 million, of whom 34.3 million were male and 19.3 million female, and the net strength of the armed forces was over 12 million men and women. In 1947, after reconversion to a peacetime economy was substantially completed, total employment was 56.7 million, of whom 40 million were male and 15.8 million female.

The entry of women into industries and occupations previously reserved almost exclusively for men was the most striking labor-market development of the war period. Women also moved into clerical and sales occupations, again replacing men. Domestic service was the only field to show a large decline in employment of women between 1940 and 1945, and hundreds of laundries closed, as laundresses found jobs elsewhere. Even teachers left their professional jobs (usually the most stable of occupational groups) to go into manufacturing.

Within two years after the war, about 14 million service men and women returned to civilian work and other millions were transferred. Any analysis of postwar employment patterns of males must distinguish between returning veterans and nonveterans.

For veterans, the return to employment was made easier by concerted placement efforts by the United States Employment Service and educational benefits provided by federal laws.
Pool and Pearlman report that probably well over half the ex-servicemen returned to work for their former employers, thanks to re-employment expectations and preference for hiring veterans. Fewer returned to farm work than had been on farms before the war, but that was part of a larger trend away from the farm. Of the non-veterans, however, one out of eight employed in civilian jobs both in August 1945 and in August 1946 had changed his occupational group in the course of the year.

Of the women employed both in August 1945 and in August 1947, the number working as operatives and craftsmen dropped by over one million. Women, however, still retained a somewhat greater proportion of industrial jobs than in pre-war years (13 percent in 1947 compared to 8 percent in 1940).

As a result of the switch to manufacturing, union membership among females increased. In 1919 total female union membership was 250,000; in 1937, 500,000; and in 1944, 3,500,000. Industrial unions appeared quicker to open their doors to women than did crafts unions, which remained closer or gave temporary membership which expired with the end of the war-time emergency.

Factory work may have represented upward mobility for many in terms of increased pay and job security, but for some it required a readjustment of a young woman's image of herself. A young war worker is quoted in a "Sister Sue" column in Ammunition, the UAW newspaper, as saying, "When I first started to work in the shop, I was sort of ashamed of it. My mother had always wanted me to do office work." Nonetheless, as we have already noted, the bulk of the women who worked in the factory during the war wanted to stay in factory work later on.

In addition to the shift to industrial employment, a marked shift in the marital status of the typical female worker occurred during the war, and it is one which has continued into the present day. Many more married women entered the labor market during the war than normally would have done so. In 1940, according to the census, single women constituted 48.5 percent of the female work force, married women 36.4 percent, and widows and divorcees 15.1 percent. During the war, however, 40.9 percent of the females working were single, 45.7 percent were married, and 13.4 percent were widowed or divorced. Of the married women, 11 percent had husbands in service. When asked if they expected to continue working, 87 percent of the single women, 94 percent of the divorced and widowed, and 57 percent of the married women said yes.
Possibly the most dramatic shift in type of employment was registered by Negro women during the war. In 1940, two out of every five Negro women (compared to two out of every eight white women) worked. Few were in industry in upgraded jobs. Of the 1.5 million Negro women working in 1940, more than half were in service occupations, agriculture, domestic help, cooking, waiting, or were seeking work (i.e., unemployed). In 1945, however, more than two million Negro women were working. Their number as craftsmen, foremen, and factory workers quadrupled, and they even entered the armed services. There was a noticeable and what turned out to be a permanent decrease of Negro women in domestic service. Negro women's employment increased not only in the munition factories but in food, clothing, textiles, leathers, and other manufacturing. The greatest increase was in metals, chemicals, and rubber.

In 1942, when women mechanics were hired for the first time at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a Negro woman got a grade of 99, the highest among the 6,000 women who applied. The event was heralded among working Negro women as a sign of changing times. Yet the same issues as would determine white women's status would determine whether Negro women kept the gains, particularly in earning power, made during the war. In this respect, Negro men, Negro women, and white women were similarly affected by the war and disappointed by its aftermath.

Wages were highest in manufacturing and especially high in the airplane and associated industries. Next in order of rates of pay were other defense-related industries and nondefense manufacturing and, at the lowest end of the wage scale, were nonmanufacturing jobs. The nationwide female average for forty hours worked was $44.21 during this period. The reasons for high wages were both wartime boom conditions and the fact that some women entering formerly males-only job classifications were permitted to earn men's wages. The peace was to end both the boom and the progress towards equal pay for equal work.

WOMEN'S COMMITMENT TO WORK

In the course of the war there were numerous assertions that wartime women workers would not stay on the job after the war was over. For the most part, these statements were based not on systematic surveys but rather on assumptions about woman's nature. To be sure, the turnover and absenteeism rates for women during the war were higher than those reported for men. Since “female workers changed jobs twice as often as men and stayed home twice as much,” their motivation was often called into question. Many viewed this employment behavior as a sign of women's dissatisfaction with war work. The Detroit News, for example, headlined an article, "Women Fade from Jobs, Prefer Homemaking to New Employment."
A far more likely cause of poor attendance was the lack of community services available to women to aid them in their dual role as worker and homemaker. Seventy-five percent of the new female workers were, as we have seen, married, and responsibilities in the home inevitably conflicted with performance on the job. A 1943 survey, conducted by the National Industrial Conference Board, reported that after illness, family needs were listed most often by females as the cause of absenteeism.

Far more powerful than the facts, however, were the assumptions about woman's place. Typical was the statement that Betty Allie, state workmen's compensation official in Michigan, made.

...women are working only to win the war and will return willingly to their home duties after the war is won. They will look on this period as an interlude, just as their men who have been called to service will consider military duties as interlude. The women are like Cincinnatus, who left his plow to save Rome and then returned to his plow. Women will always be women.

Others, like Frederick Crawford, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, were not so sure women would willingly return to the home but thought they ought to. He called it a "perplexing war's-end problem." He was convinced that women wanted to work, but reminded his hearers that the "home is the basic American unit" and that "home-makers are essential to the morale and well-being of male workers and as a first-line prevention [note the war metaphor] against juvenile delinquency."

He also was aware that women with college educations might be better suited to careers than to domesticity, and concluded that single women, widows, and the well-educated might go on working without tearing the fabric of the American system.

More ironic was the conviction, uttered often in this period by Frances Perkins, that at the close of the war women would "return to the homes they left for patriotic reasons." Many newspapers women predicted a mass exodus of women workers, assuming as did Secretary Perkins that nothing but the urgency of war had generated the increase in female labor force participation.

The survey conducted by the Women's Bureau in 1944 obtained the following results when inquiring about postwar plans: 51 percent of the women who planned to continue working after the war were single; 34 percent were married; 15 percent were widowed or divorced. The highest percentage of prospective postwar workers came from the group of women who had been employed before Pearl Harbor rather than from those who had been in school or engaged in housework. On the average, 80 percent of the women who had been employed before Pearl Harbor intended to keep on working.
The crux of the problem was this: even if only one-half of the former housewives were converted to work by the war, it would not significantly reduce the post-war pressure for good jobs, since the bulk of the females working in 1944 wanted to go right on working.

Thus, Frances Perkins and Frederick Crawford might have been right about the magnet of the American home for former housewives, but they were wrong about the power of the home to attract those whose working lives had antedated Pearl Harbor and those who had gone directly from school to work.

This explanation is the only way we can make sense of other survey data having to do with women workers’ post-war plans. The UAW, for example, reported that a survey done of their own membership indicated that fully 85 percent of the women then working wanted to continue to work after the war. The report predicted that of the 350,000 female UAW members, 300,000 would want to go on working.

To the question, "If a job is available, will you continue to work outside your home after the war?" 98.5 percent of the single women and 100 percent of the widows answered, "Yes." Among the married women 68.7 percent (this is the highest proportion of married women responding positively in any of the surveys taken) said yes. In reporting the figures, R. J. Thomas, president of the UAW, said the results of the study would "shatter the preconceived ideas of certain industrialists and 'experts' who think the majority of women workers will want to leave the labor market."

The union president might have released these figures because, at the time, the union was pressing for a national commitment to full employment, or the guarantee of 60 million postwar jobs through a public works program.

Data from other sectors of the manufacturing economy confirm the results of the UAW survey. A survey done in Cleveland, Ohio, by the Emergency Day Care office found that 60 percent of the women working wanted to continue working after the war. In Dayton, Ohio, women in manufacturing indicated they wanted to keep working in the same industry, though laundresses and waitresses wanted to change jobs.

In a poll taken in 1944, by the Northwestern Life Insurance Company at seven scattered war plants, 66 percent of the women employed reported that they wanted to remain at work.
That Rosie the Riveter was not middle class became obvious when studies were done of the financial responsibilities borne by working women during the war. One such survey, undertaken by the Division of Industrial Relations in New York state in March 1946, concluded:

*Women, like men, work because their earnings are needed to support themselves and their families and to meet home expenses . . . single women support themselves and aged parents, married women support themselves and dependents.*

Indeed, the 1,114 women workers surveyed in cooperation with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America from 1944 to 1946, one-fifth were the only contributing wage earners to their families and one-half were the main source of income for relatives living elsewhere. More than 80 percent of this group planned to continue working, 93 percent of these for financial reasons.

**LAYOFFS**

In 1919, after World War I, a reaction against women war workers had set in, due largely to the fear that lower-paid women would be competing with men for scarce jobs. The AFL trade unions at the time received the backing of the War Labor Board in demanding that women workers give up their jobs. A strike of male employees against the street railways in Cleveland, Ohio, forced the War Labor Board to order the company to dismiss all its women workers. By 1920, as a result of such pressure, the percentage of women employed was no larger than if there had been no abnormal increase in the preceding war years.

Towards the end of World War II, in anticipation of a recurrence of the problems of converting from a war to a peace-time economy, a number of conferences were held around the country. Organizations, ranging in type from the YWCA and ad-hoc committees to unions and monitored by the UAW, revealed that a management focused on the fears and needs of the postwar world.

A Conference sponsored by the Women's Department of the UAW and held December 4-6 1944 was typical. Frieda Miller, recently appointed director of the Women's Bureau, attended, as did Eleanor Roosevelt and Helen Gahagan Douglas, Congresswoman from California. Four issues were isolated as crucial in protecting female employees from post-war dislocation and discrimination; equal pay for equal work; postwar re-employment; wages and seniority. In addition, the conference concerned itself with childcare, maternity leave and the question of greater female participation in union activities. The Equal Rights Amendment was still mostly condemned

*Frieda S. Miller. director of the U.S. Department of Labor — Women's Bureau, from 1944-1953.*
The longest discussion focused on issues related to seniority. The resolution which was finally adopted called for strict application of seniority and the elimination of all discriminatory lists for men and women. The resolution was adopted by the UAW in 1946.) Mrs. Roosevelt summed up the spirit of the meeting when she said she hoped women would not become “expendable home front soldiers.”

Fundamental to the thinking of the union was the commitment to “full employment” which was to be an obligation of industry as compensation for its high profit margin during the war. One advantage of the total employment concept was that it relieved the union of having to take sides in a male/female or even a Negro/White competition for scarce jobs. Indeed, the final resolution passed at the meeting stated that “women do not want special consideration or privilege” in the postwar readjustment.

The conference prevented nothing. Already in August 1944, early cutbacks monitored by the UAW, revealed that a disproportionate number of female employees were being laid off. In aircraft parts plants, while women were 42.2 percent of the workers employed, they constituted 60.2 percent of the workers laid off. And in the aircraft engine plants while women were 39.2 percent of the workers employed, they were 86 percent of the layoffs. In the truck and agricultural industry, women were 13.1 percent of the war work force, but 51.6 percent of the layoffs. In ordinance, at 15.6 percent of the work force, they were 61 percent of the layoffs. Nothing in the women’s contracts or performance, it appeared was going to protect them from selective layoffs.

One reason was the conviction on the part of most that women did not want to work. Since female attitudes toward layoffs were individual and idiosyncratic, no data has been accumulated systematically; however, our impression from reading their grievances on file at the Labor and Urban Affairs Archives at Wayne State is that for the most part women war workers expected and did not especially resent being laid off. What they did resent and several filed grievances against was that they were not rehired in accordance with their perceived seniority when the plant was reconverted to postwar production, sometimes as early as one or two years later.

**Unemployment figures for women**

Already in August 1944, early cutbacks, had doubled. At Ford, where, as we have seen, women had not had factory jobs before the war, women were down to 4 percent of the work force from a peak of 22 percent.

From union monitoring we get figures like the following: at Hoover Company, September 28, 1944, of 65 workers laid off, 55 were women; at Metal Stamping Job Shop, 98 percent of layoffs were women; at Aluminum Company of Ames, 50 percent of the layoffs were women; at American Brake and Block, 90 percent of the layoffs were women; at American Leather
Products, 100 percent of the layoffs were women; at Asbestos Manufacturing Company, 100 percent of the layoffs were women; at Baker Roulang Company, 100 percent of the layoffs were women.

Rationalizations flew thick and fast. Lucy Greenbaum, in the New York Times article cited above, quoted a Ford spokesman as saying that the wartime light assembly work that women could do was being replaced by the heavy, tiring assembly work of cars that women could not "handle." From the Oliver Company in Springfield, Ohio, that had manufactured 40mm antiaircraft shells came a report to UAW headquarters that of the male employees who were taken off war work, 50 percent had been placed in other jobs in the plant.

"There are jobs in this plant at the present time, but they are not suitable for female workers. The work is too heavy. The girls may find work in this area, but naturally it will have to be at lower wages as most plants seem to be asking for male workers."

**SENIORITY**

It is our impression, after this preliminary survey, that the bulk of the women war workers were not surprised or upset at being laid off at war's end but did expect that seniority would be honored in rehiring. They did not want "special treatment," as the December 1944 conference said explicitly, but they wanted equal access to jobs. The issue of seniority, then, was a central one, made complicated by the fact that one cannot generalize about seniority arrangements, since they varied by union contract and by industry.

The war presented such an abnormal situation that ordinary expectations and ordinary standards could not be set or met. As demand for certain war products ended, for example, whole departments of plants closed down. Seniority, then, to be meaningful, had to be (1) "plant-wide" so that employees relocated from one to another department could retain their accumulated seniority wherever they went and (2) not "separate" for females and Negroes, as had so often been the case in seniority listing before the war.

A closer look at some union contracts reveals the stickiness of the issue of seniority. One contract, signed between the UAW and Ford Motor Company and which covered workers in most Ford operated plants during much of the war, was dated November 4, 1942, that is, shortly after the demands of the wartime economy were beginning to be felt. Management was to provide broad protection for workers on a number of important points, and the union in return promised not to strike during the war emergency.

Although the document was supplemented by additional agreements reached on May 10, 1943, and on June 6, 1943, the salient paragraphs regarding seniority and rehiring rights are in the original version. Seniority was defined in the contract as the right to employment after a six-month probationary period in order of the date of original hire. Whether seniority was to be by interchangeable occupational groups or plant-wide was to be determined locally.
Thus far, the contract is not unusual. But there was to be a distinction made between employees who were working on or before June 20, 1941, and those who came to work later (presumably after Pearl Harbor). For the first group, seniority was to be cumulative from the first day of employment and would obtain even if there had been a "break" in employment not exceeding four years.

Thus, long before the war’s outcome or its duration could have been known, the contract promised preferential treatment to persons on the payroll in early 1941 and arranged to protect the seniority of persons, presumably male, who would be leaving their employ for a "break" in the armed forces. This all but guaranteed the former worker who had been drafted a job.

Another mode of differentiating seniority, found in other union contracts, was to retain separate seniority listings even when women and Negroes were assigned, because of the emergency, to formerly males-only or by tradition whites-only jobs. A typical clause, taken from the Federal Mogul Corporation's contract with Local 202, reads:

> . . . all female employees hired subsequent to July 1, 1942, shall be placed on a special seniority list and shall be considered as male replacements and as having been hired solely because of the shortage of male labor, and their tenure of employment shall be limited to the duration of the war, or as soon thereafter as they can be replaced by former male employees or other male applicants.

In another contract between H.A. Douglas and Local 822, the clause read:

> In cases where women are presently employed on jobs which are defined as a man’s job, it is agreed that as soon as the labor supply becomes adequate, men will be placed on these jobs without regard to seniority and women will continue to maintain their seniority separate and apart from men.

Separate was by no means equal, as the following excerpt from a Lamson and Sessions contract with Local 217 reveals:

> The Company shall have the right to transfer or place men temporarily on jobs normally performed by women and to pay men’s wages for such work without establishing males’ rates for females when females are later returned to the job.

Finally, and most explicit, was a clause in a contract between United Steel & Wire and Local 704 which read:

> When a man is the youngest employee in a classification involved in a reduction of force, he shall be permitted to bump any woman filling a job designated as a man’s job by job evaluation . . . .
In case of plant-wide layoff, women employees holding duly designated men’s jobs will be laid off before any man employee. A woman employee is not permitted to bump a man employee off a man’s job.

Job classification, then, as revealed by these agreements, was to be the loophole in the entire seniority system as regards women. A woman working in a "man’s job" during the war could be bumped off that job at the end of the war, her seniority rights notwithstanding, simply because it was in a separate classification of "men's only jobs." If, at the same plant, no "women's jobs" remained available, she could legitimately be laid off altogether. The only protection a woman worker had against such discriminatory laying off was

1. where no men’s or women’s job classifications existed, or
2. where there were nondiscrimination clauses incorporated into the union contracts, along with general seniority provisions.

How seniority was to be honored after the war was over, however, was an even stickier matter. On the one hand, the unions had used seniority as a selling point to women workers. As one union brochure stated:

*History must not be allowed to repeat itself. Join a union. Secure equal seniority with men. Seniority forms the basis of your right to a job in the plant. It should not depend on sex or race.*

Wherever one stood on the issue of veterans' rights, it was clear to everyone that "postwar employment would weaken the entire seniority structure." Returning servicemen, women who wanted to stay in the industry, upgraded workers who refused to go back to assembly or common laborers' jobs, these all constituted pressure groups interested in breaking seniority rules.

In some plants, as we have seen in our review of the UAW contract with Ford, the union interpreted the Selective Service Act of 1940 to mean that a worker's seniority accumulated on his old job while he was in the armed service and that upon his discharge he would be entitled to reemployment in order of relative senior standing. In other plants an even stronger position was taken on returning servicemen's rights, and it was assumed that "the Selective Service Act requires the reemployment of all servicemen regardless of their relative seniority standing in the plant."
The problems going into the postwar period, then, were these: First, the position of the Selective Service was simply unenforceable since the federal government was not able to guarantee jobs in private industry to anyone; second, no "guarantee" could apply to the needs of those servicemen who had not worked prior to entering the service; and third, except if there were full employment, all such accommodation would be at the expense of the seniority rights of women and other minority workers.

Union leadership was aware of all the dangers. Victor Reuther, assistant director of the War Policy Division of the UAW, wrote to his brother Walter on March 16, 1944:

> It seems most employers are generally agreed that a line should be drawn probably at the date of Pearl Harbor, and that all veterans with no previous work experience should be given priority in employment as against those hired in war industries since Pearl Harbor. I think this is a very dangerous approach for the union to take, particularly in Pontiac, where large numbers of Negroes have been upgraded or integrated into plants, the bulk of whom, as well as many women, will be thrown out of work as the result of such an agreement.

That individual women workers resisted these developments is illustrated by the protests and picketing that went on at the Ford Highland Park plant in December 1945, for example, when 200 women picketed and demanded an end to alleged discriminatory practices by the company. General Motors workers in Pontiac, Michigan, held regular meetings on the subject of women's seniority rights. A regional conference of UAW women workers met in November and December 1945 on the same subject. One victory is reported on behalf of women against General Motors in May 1947.

The company had laid women off in 1945 and then rehired them in the late spring and early fall of 1946. By November 1946 the corporation's recruitment campaign to attract (male) workers from other parts of Michigan and from out of state had borne fruit and the women were fired, allegedly because they had become a "distracting influence." The order bypassed women with seniority and also ignored employees on guaranteed probation. Local 653 filed a grievance and 150 General Motors women were rehired.
Elsewhere, however, the union did not always press claims brought by women against their companies.

The Equal Rights Amendment, of course, would have rendered job classifications unconstitutional had it been passed before or during the war. But the controversy that surrounded the proposed amendment reveals again the ambivalence both on the part of women and of labor unions when the question of women's rights was in conflict with women's protection.

Separate job classifications were in our view the inevitable corollary of protective legislation.

Although numerous protective requirements were suspended during the war to permit women to do "men's jobs" temporarily, states needed only to revive these requirements after the war in order to take men's jobs away from women. Thus, were seniority rights, layoffs, and women's protective laws enmeshed.

**PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION**

During the first two years of the war, provision was made in twenty states and in the District of Columbia, through enactment of laws or grants of emergency powers to executive officers, for extension of maximum daily or weekly working hours for women. Night work laws were modified in eight states, and in four states various occupations, previously covered by work-hour limitations, were exempted. Two states reduced the number of occupations denied women.

In most cases, the exemption granted was a special exemption and not a general modification. In her 1943 annual report, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins recommended post-war revocation of all permits granted in the war period for more than eight-hour days or "grave-yard" shifts.

An example of the protections for women required by the State of Michigan in 1942 is:

**Provisions Governing Employment of Women in the State of Michigan**

1. Women shall not be required to remain standing constantly, and seats shall be provided.
2. Women shall not be required to lift more than 35 pounds in the course of their regular work, provided that women shall not be required to lift more than 20 pounds when ascending stairs.
3. Women shall be prohibited from doing any type of overhead lifting or stacking. Women shall be prohibited from employment in foundries (except in core rooms).
4. Employment of women shall be prohibited in the handling of any of the following harmful substances or in the following operations, unless
ventilation and working conditions are approved by the Department of Labor and Industry: a. Lead; b. Benzene c. Carbon disulphide; d. Mercury; e. Arc welding; f. Dry grinding wheels.

5. Women's dressing rooms and first aid stations shall be furnished with a bed or cot.

6. Women shall not be employed in any other type of employment disproportionate to their strength or in any way detrimental to their morals, health, or potential capacity for motherhood.

7. No employer shall discriminate in any way in the payment of wages as between male and female employees in the manufacture or production of any article of like value either on piece work or time basis.

8. No women employed in manufacturing shall be required to work longer than 54 hours per week, not more than an average of 9 hours per day and not over 10 hours in any one day.

Recommended Employment Practice

1. Female employees should be required to wear proper safety clothing.
2. Definite rest periods of fifteen minutes in morning and afternoon should be established.
3. Where possible, sanitary lunchroom facilities should be made available.

One of the functions of the UAW Women's Bureau was to act in an advisory capacity to management in regard to male and female job classifications. Although the Women's Bureau at the time stood in favor of protective laws and separate job classifications, the women found, when forced to apply their judgement to specific jobs, that they could "always think of one woman who could do any man's job."

Adjustments were made, however, to expand the jobs that women could do. One large filling-station chain, for instance, devised a tilting cradle to lift big jugs of distilled water for filling battery kits. Leverage tools were made to get tires out of rims without strain, and a new gadget on grease guns simplified the job of filling them. All these innovations, according to the Wall Street Journal, were going to be retained in peacetime. Thus, the net effect of women taking over men's jobs, given the protective restrictions, was to improve the working and safety conditions which would eventually benefit men as well.

However, in the initial stages there was an incremental cost attached to putting women into men's jobs: new or improved equipment, the cost of lunch and rest periods, the transportation provided for night shift work, and the proportion of child-care cost, if any, provided by the corporation; all could be used to justify paying women lower rates for the same work done. Thus, protective legislation became in time an issue in regard to equal pay for equal work.
EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK

The “double standard” industrial wage rates dates back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when the status of women as the “weaker sex” was accepted even by women themselves. The first significant revolt against wage differentials based on sex came during the first World War, when women found themselves able to do men’s work and carry men’s responsibilities. In 1917 the War Labor Board issued a policy supporting the principle of equal pay for equal work. When during World War II the National War Labor Board, the arbiter of price, wage, and profit controls for the entire economy, finally adopted the principle of equal pay for equal work and heard specific cases on the subject, a precedent was set which eighteen years later would find its way into congressional legislation and become a goal of American industrial equity. (The Equal Pay Act was not passed until 1963.)

The problem of equal pay for equal work was and still remains complicated by standard hiring rate differentials, the widespread practice of designating certain job classifications as female and others as male in union contracts with management, and the rest periods, lunch periods, additional supervision, and occasional help needed by women which are or are thought to be unnecessary when men are employed.

The reason the National War Labor Board got involved in the issue at all was through its control over wage rates. As women found themselves doing jobs identical to those done by men and protested their lower wage rates, permission had to be obtained from the board in order to raise their wages. Thus, when in November 1942 the board issued General Order 16, accepting the principle of equal pay for equal work, it was careful to permit wage increases to accommodate achievement of equity but not to require them. Some states did require equal pay at the time, however. They were Illinois, Michigan, Montana, New York, and Washington.

Numerous cases came up before the board for the purpose of defining the principle of equal pay for equal work. One of the earliest was the Norman Hoffman Bearing Corporation case. The judgment reached in this case was that women replacing men were entitled to the same wages for the same work, but that differentials based on a
"proper time study" should be established for operations in which women required male assistance.

Management could, of course, avoid paying women equal rates by slightly altering the job classifications to make them "different" and "unequal." Such practice, however, was explicitly outlawed by the board on September 26, 1942, when it ruled that "there should be no discrimination between employees whose production is substantially the same on comparable jobs." The board continued by stating that the quantity and quality of production should be considered and not simply the physical characteristics of the operations. Still the board allowed proportionate adjustment in women's wages to be made if lower production or decreased performance were noticeable. There were some eighty cases that came before the national board and its regional units during the period of the war which bear witness to the fact that the principle of equal pay was difficult to apply.

The dynamics of the situation are not hard to recreate: the War Labor Board, committed to an anti-inflation policy, did not want to raise rates; the union did not want men's rates to be lowered to achieve equity with women. Indeed, one way to account for union pressure on behalf of women's equal pay is that the equal pay clauses in contracts were designed to protect the wage-earning potential of men when they returned from the war and were prompted by a fear that employers would try to reduce pay scales during the war because women were then holding jobs previously held by men. That the union was slow to see women as equal to men in their own ranks can be inferred from the fact that it was not until 1968 that a woman was elected to the UAW Board.

We do not know the total number of equal pay cases brought by women during the war, but a few may give the flavor of the issues involved. One against Brown-Lipe Chapin, a General Motors plant in Syracuse, New York, netted an average of $500 per woman worker as pay was increased retroactively from $0.78 to $0.93 per hour.

Twelve hundred women at Hudson Car Company, formerly being paid $0.88 to $0.91 per hour for work for which men were getting $1.20 or more, filed a claim against the company. They, too, were awarded back pay and the case resulted in Hudson's promise to establish a single seniority list as well. The story does not end happily, however, as the women had to return to "women's jobs" after the war and in the fall of 1946 were again earning only $0.90 an hour.

After the war, the equal pay decisions of the National War Labor Board were, of course, no longer binding. In any case, clerical workers and others had never been covered by the favorable rulings. To compensate, Congressmen Pepper of Florida and Morse of Oregon introduced the Equal Pay Act in 1945 and again in 1946 and 1947. The law was designed to eliminate discrimination in wage practices based on sex. Had it been approved, the Equal Pay Act would have prohibited paying female employees at a lower rate than males for work of
comparable quality or quantity; prohibited discharging female employees and replacing them with males except to protect the re-employment rights of returned veterans.

The bill, of course, covered only industries engaged in interstate commerce, but in any case it was defeated on the floor when Senator Taft of Ohio argued for its postponement on the grounds that it would put another federal bureau into the executive office of every business in the country.

Unions were not favorable to the Equal Pay Act, as George Meany revealed, on the grounds that equal pay should be a problem of collective bargaining and not one of federal legislation. Yet a Women's Bureau survey of collective bargaining agreements, undertaken in 1948, showed that only 17 percent had equal pay clauses.

UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION

As part of the myth that women workers were happy to be laid off, the newspapers after the war began to assert that women were looking forward to their unemployment compensation. The Wall Street Journal, on May 4, 1945, headlined an article: "Laid-Off Willow Run Workers 'Choosy' about New Jobs. Some Loafing. They Count on Unemployment Pay. Half the Women through with War Work." The article quoted many individual men and women talking of being laid off and concluded:

Besides the workers who had had all the war plant work they wanted and the others who feel the urge for a little vacation before they take on a new job, there are a good many of those signifying a desire for immediate employment who have been turning up their noses at jobs offered them.

The article never mentioned that pay differentials might have been the reason that the Willow Run employees were being "choosy," nor that Willow Run was not making equal efforts to place its female workers.

The other side of the story emerges out of a union report on the successful outcome of a struggle with the Michigan Unemployment Compensation Commission. The issue involved the requirement by the Unemployment Commission that to qualify for unemployment women seeking work must be willing to work all three shifts. Those women refusing (or not allowed under state law) to work the third shift, for example, were disqualified from unemployment compensation against their will. Some women, though we do not yet have documentation on individual cases, were denied unemployment compensation when they refused jobs at lower rates of pay than they had been earning. Thus, was the Unemployment Commission implicated in the more general attempt to force women to go back to "women's work."
CHILD CARE

About half of the war-employed women living with children of their own under 14 years of age arranged for the care of the children by relatives in the household. Other arrangements for caring for children varied widely.

Nursery schools contributed little to the child-care picture. With 75 percent of the new workers married women and the official recognition that the lack of child-care centers could affect war production through high absenteeism, it was agreed during the war that childcare ought to be provided. As Chafe suggests, the only issue was whether the government or the local community could provide the care. The first federal contribution was by Roosevelt in 1942 when $400,000 was allotted to assist local communities in funding childcare. In 1943 the Lanham Act authorized the building of day-care centers with federal money. (Lanham had intended his bill to appropriate money for wartime "facilities," meaning factories, and the bill was interpreted to fund childcare.)

In 1945 another Lanham Bill, H.R.3187, was introduced asking for $30 million to continue federal day-care centers after the war. Congressmen, in arguing against the bill, said "women should be driven back to their homes," and for this and other reasons the bill failed. Instead, the Senate voted $20 million on July 15, 1945, to continue childcare centers through 1946, providing operating expenses but no money for expansion. After March 1, 1946, all federal support for childcare facilities ceased.

The UAW-CIO supported childcare appropriations by the federal government throughout. But increase in juvenile delinquency during the war years and the fear of psychological damage to children separated from the mother all militated against any permanent alteration in child-care patterns emerging from the war emergency.

CONCLUSIONS

On February 21, 1946, the Women's Bureau called a conference to prepare suggested standards for union contract provisions affecting women. Of the six subjects covered: lunch periods, maternity leaves, discrimination, wages, seniority, and rest periods, two would qualify under "protective legislation," as previously defined (lunch and rest periods); all the rest were meant to guarantee equal treatment. The maternity leave
provision, for example, began with the sentence:

*Pregnancy shall not be grounds for dismissal of any women employee and any woman absent from work for maternity purposes shall continue to accumulate seniority and shall retain full seniority until the expiration of one year from date of leaving .and shall upon returning to work be returned to her former job at a rate of pay not less than currently paid on the job at which she was formerly employed.*

Other recommendations were for clauses requiring that wage rates established under this contract shall be set by the job and not by the sex of the worker. Wage rates and job classifications [should be] based on job content. Jobs or departments shall not be designated by sex. **All** previously existing sex classifications shall be eliminated.

In terms of prevention of layoffs, the document stated explicitly that "no new employees shall be hired as long as women currently employed are available for upgrading" and recommended a general clause reading, "It is mutually agreed between the company and the union that no discrimination based on sex or marital status shall be practiced or permitted."

What is interesting about this document is first that the Women's Bureau, which had emphasized *protective legislation* and not *equal rights* through most of the period up to the war, appears to have been educated by the union women during the war to the subtleties of factory discrimination. The second aspect of the document worth noting is that it assumes that there will be postwar compensation for wartime inequities, which of course never happens. At the very moment that the Women's Bureau Conference was formulating these standard clauses, corporations were laying off women and not rehiring them or honoring their seniority.

The reasons that the Women's Bureau seems so peculiarly out of phase is a subject for study. We have some evidence that there was real alienation between the UAW Women's Bureau and the National Women's Bureau. Perhaps the reason was the class difference dividing the women in Detroit from the women in Washington. But the Women's Bureau's ambivalence on the subject of women's rights was systemic as well. After the war, the Bureau argued in a classic *non sequitur* that since women proved themselves during the war, they "therefore" could be expected to do competent work in very traditional, sex stereotyped occupations.

The pamphlet, written in January 1945 by the Director of the Bureau, discussed how the "skills" women had developed during the war could be turned to peacetime uses. She listed as "skills" their nimble fingers, their dexterity, and their perseverance; and she saw opportunities for women in the electrical industry, in radio parts and small metal products, in clocks, and in the new plastics. Another temptation was to reiterate
after the war the familiar panegyric to the homemaker:

*Though the homemaker is not listed in the census as “gainfully employed,” it is important to recognize her activities as an occupation. She earns her living in services to home, family, community, society.*

For all the consciousness-raising, then, the Women’s Bureau was still not willing to reconsider Mary Anderson’s characterization of the Equal Rights Amendment as “vicious” or to support any view of the world which saw men and women in competition.

But if Frieda Miller, the economist who replaced Mary Anderson as Director of the Women’s Bureau in 1944, was not yet willing to fight for equal rights, she was, as was the Bureau, committed to equal pay and equal right to work.

The Bureau did show itself to be aware of postwar employment problems as well as gains when it reported in the January 12, 1947, issue of the *Balance Sheet* the facts that one million fewer women were working in 1947 than had been working in November 1945, and that many had left shipyard jobs at $60 per week to go into department store selling at lower wages and longer hours.

The report also noted that of the one million fewer women working, 500,000 were listed as unemployed (that is, actively seeking work) in 1947. This was to foreshadow the great shift among poor women onto unemployment and later welfare rolls.
In Closing

Indeed, if as we have argued, Rosie the Riveter was probably a working woman before the war, the gains made during the war may have been such to make unacceptable a return to her status quo ante. Or, with technological and other shifts in the economy her kind of service job may have been permanently eliminated. Further research is needed to determine whether the women who worked in well-paying jobs during the war found service jobs, became unemployed, or drifted into poverty during the fifties. We do not know what happened to every Rosie.

What we do know is that by 1953 one million women were listed nationally as job seekers and that of these, the largest percentage were Negro women. Moreover, of the additional 37 million women reported as nonworkers (housewives), there is no way of knowing how many would have been working if they could.

Regional shifts in employment and the increasing migration of the rural poor to the north and Midwest are generally held responsible for the increase in welfare rolls in this same period. But possibly another way to account for the persistent one-third of America that remained poor throughout the fifties and sixties is to re-examine the opportunities for work and the average take-home pay for female heads of households in the period after World War II.
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